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Active learning strategies: A comparison of first-year university users and non-users of a self-access learning facility in Japan

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Abstract

This paper reports the initial results of a survey conducted as part of a multidimensional study. It explores the implications of active learning strategies and interventions adopted at a university level self-access learning center for English language education in Japan. The study examines two sample groups of students enrolled in a semester-long freshmen English speaking course: students who chose to utilize and students who chose not to utilize the self-access learning center for class-related purposes. The study begins with a comparison of the sample groups in an attempt to understand factors that influence students' attitudes toward learning English and engagement in learning activities. A brief detail of students' reported reasons for not utilizing the facility is provided, and attention is brought to gender differences among participants, which offers insights into accessibility and student autonomy. Finally, a description of students' perceived benefits and learning outcomes are offered as preliminary evidence of students' active engagement in the learning process. The study holds practical implications to improve learning experiences for students in learning spaces outside of traditional classroom settings. It is hoped that findings spark interest in the learning environments of self-access learning centers and their role in facilitating language learning and learning outcomes for students.

Keywords: active learning strategies, learner autonomy, self-access learning centers, learning environments, English language education

1. INTRODUCTION

The quality of higher education is a rising concern for countries around the world. While there are many factors that influence the quality of higher education, the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies are especially important due to its direct implications to the learning process and learning outcomes for students (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2009, 2019a). Bonwell and Eison, credited with bringing active learning to the forefront of higher education, state that "the more college students become involved in the education process, the more they learn" (1991, p. xvii). They define active learning as "anything that

involves students in doing things and in thinking about the things they are doing" (Bonswell and Eison, 1991, p. 2). Bonwell and Eison describe incorporating activities such as collaborative learning, role-playing, simulations, games, debates, peer teaching, visual-based instruction, and writing to facilitate learning and engage students in the learning process. Raya and Vieira (2015) offer further evidence that autonomy is critical for deep learning to occur in active learning practices.

In the momentum to implement national educational reforms and improve the quality of education, the concept of active learning, in particular, has seized the attention of academics, researchers, and policymakers in Japan. The Japanese government has gone to great lengths to promote active learning in its education policies and integrate active learning strategies into the national curriculum (Ito, 2017; Ito and Kawazoe, 2015; Matsushita, 2018; McMurray, 2018). According to McMurray (2018), citing Isabell, Sagliano, Sagliano, and Steward, the 1997 report by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) Curriculum Council for Education indicated a shift in Japan from traditional teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning strategies. They suggest that the shift shows “clear links with active learning: to develop autonomous learning and critical thinking skills; and to promote education based on the needs of a student population” (Isabell et al., 1999, p. 3).

Literature focusing on active learning strategies as an alternative to traditional teacher-centered instruction in classroom settings has gained momentum in recent years. However, its impact on positive learning outcomes remains somewhat unclear even at the national level (National Institute for Educational Policy Research [NIER], 2017). For this reason, there remains a need to continue research on active learning in Japan and carefully consider how traditional and innovative learning environments impact Japanese students’ active engagement in the learning process. In particular, not enough research has been conducted to understand the impacts that autonomy-supportive learning environments of self-access learning centers have on student motivation and attitude towards learning English, student engagement in the learning process, and student learning outcomes. It is necessary to point out that Bonwell and Eison (1991) emphasize the importance of a supportive and inclusive learning environment for active learning to occur in educational settings. This offers a clear indication that self-access learning facilities have the potential to engage students in active learning effectively.

Self-access learning centers can be found on increasing numbers of university campuses in Japan (Japan Association for Self-Access Learning [JASAL], 2019). Murray suggests that a number of large-scale self-access learning centers have "transformed into social learning spaces" due to a

"major shift in the purpose and function of these facilities" (2018, p. 102). The focus on social learning spaces highlights the positive impacts of social interactions facilitated in supportive learning environments. Educational literature has indicated that social interactions promote the identity development of students, in particular, during the first year of the university experience (Sugimura & Mizokami, 2012; Sugimura & Shimizu, 2011). The investigation into autonomy-supportive learning environments and the impact of active learning strategies and interventions on first-year university students hold practical implications to improve the quality of English language education, an essential pillar of global education in Japan.

2. BACKGROUND

Japanese Education System

The Japanese education system was built in the national constitution and set forth in the basic national policy that "all people shall have the right to receive an equal education corresponding to their ability, as provided by law" (MEXT, 2018b, para. 1). The national education system is a comprehensive system that spans from early childhood care education to higher education. Compulsory education consists of nine years, equating to six years of primary education and three years of lower secondary education. Nearly all students continue to upper secondary education. The completion rate of upper secondary education is approximately 95%, one of the highest completion rates among the OECD member countries (OECD, 2017a). Among students who graduate from upper secondary, 58% of students continue their education and enroll in higher education institutions, which is well above the OECD average of 26% (OECD, 2010).

According to OECD, the amount spent on higher education in Japan was 18,022 US dollars per student, one of the highest among OECD member countries in 2014 (OECD, 2018b). Government public spending on education accounted for only 6.4% of educational expenses incurred at the elementary to post-secondary non-tertiary level and 1.8% of educational expenses for the tertiary level (OECD, 2010). A comparison of the number of schools, students, and teachers in the private and public sector shows that while the public sector has higher numbers of schools, students, and teachers at the elementary to post-secondary non-tertiary levels, the private sector has higher numbers of schools, students, and teachers at the kindergarten and tertiary levels (MEXT, 2018a). Although Japan's overall public expenditure on education is one of the lowest among OECD countries, Japanese students have managed to perform above average in math, science, and reading literacy measured by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a global assessment measuring the academic performance of 15-year-olds in countries around the world (OECD, 2021 January 23). Results of the most recent PISA, however, indicate overall weaker student performance and are cause for serious concern for Japan's national government

(MEXT, 2018c).

Japanese Education Policy

Educating students who are able to engage in the rapidly globalizing society successfully is at the core of the current national education policy. Based on the 2006 revised Basic Act on Education, the Third Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education has been adopted for 2018-2022. The Third Basic Plan is comprised of five policies and 21 educational goals. The five polices are aimed at 1) developing the capacity to achieve goals, promote self-confidence, and navigate new possibilities, 2) developing diverse abilities to secure the sustainable development of society, 3) establishing an environment that promotes lifelong learning, 4) developing safety nets for learning, and 5) establishing the foundations to implement educational policies (MEXT, 2018b).

The first phase of implementing the comprehensive national curriculum began at the kindergarten level in 2018, followed by a transition period to its second and subsequent phases in 2020 for primary level, 2021 for lower secondary level, and 2022 for upper secondary level education. The main pillars of the national curriculum reform intend to promote 1) the motivation to learn and apply learning to life, 2) the acquisition of knowledge and technical skills, and 3) the strengthening of skills to think, make judgments, and express individuality (OECD, 2018a). The national government relies heavily on active learning strategies that engage students in the learning process to implement these reforms at all levels of education to navigate internal challenges that face the nation.

Aging Society and Decreasing Birthrates in Japan

Internal factors of an increasingly aging population, a steadily declining birthrate, and a working-age population are concerns for all stakeholders in the Japanese education system. According to the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2017), the results of the population projection for Japan based on future changes in fertility and mortality rates report that the population is projected to dramatically decrease from 127.09 million (total population including non-Japanese residents) in 2015 to 88.8 million in 2065. The population composition detailed in the same report forecasts a decrease in the young-age population (under 15 years) from 1.01 million to 45.29 million and working-age population (15 to 65 years) from 77.28 million to 45.29 million. In contrast, the forecast predicts an increase in the aging population of 65 years and over from 33.87 million in 2015 to 39.35 million in 2042, followed by a decrease to 33.81 million in 2065. The demographic changes that face Japan have grave implications on the nation's capacity to sustain economic growth and international competitiveness in an increasingly complex and interconnected global society.

Student Mobility & International Competitiveness

MEXT (2016) published a report on Japanese student mobility based on data collections from OECD Education at a Glance, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Cultural Statistics, Institute of International Exchange Open Doors, Chinese Ministry of Education, and Taiwan Ministry of Education. The data covering three decades show a steady decrease in Japanese students studying overseas from a high of 82, 945 in 2004 to 53,197 in 2014 (MEXT, 2016). A report issued by the United States Embassy and Consulate in Japan (2015), show that the number of international students studying in America, the country which hosts the highest number of international students, increased by 10% for a record high of 974, 926 in 2014. Although America continues to rank as the most popular study abroad destination for Japanese students (MEXT, 2016), Japan recorded a decrease of Japanese students studying in America in the same year that America recorded an increase in the total number of international students. Furthermore, the report shows that Japan significantly lags behind China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Canada, Brazil, and Taiwan in terms of student mobility on a global level (U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Japan, 2015).

English Proficiency of Japanese Students

The Japanese Business Foundation (2017) compared the average test scores of test-takers in neighboring countries based on data from the Educational Testing Service's (ETS) annual Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) iBT test and score summary report. The results of the globally recognized English proficiency test for non-native English speakers, show that the TOEFL iBT average scores earned by Japanese test-takers are consistently and significantly lower than other test-takers in neighboring countries: specifically, China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam (see Figure 1). A broader comparison reveals that among the approximate 35 countries from the same geographic region, Japan placed second to last alongside Afghanistan, followed by Laos in 2017 (Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2018a). TOEFL iBT test results in subsequent years show no significant change in Japan's status among Asia countries (ETS, 2019).

Japanese students' modest English proficiency is not limited to TOEFL iBT. ETS, which also conducts the internationally recognized Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) for nonnative speakers, reported that Japan ranked 40th among 48 countries in 2013 (Hongo, 2014). Despite the government's efforts to improve foreign language education, the situation remains mostly unchanged (ETS, 2018b). Yokogawa (2017) points out that Japan's low ranking among Asian countries reflects the shortcoming of English language education in Japan. She suggests it is a likely the result of factors such as large class size, lack of teacher autonomy to incorporate lessons focusing on speaking, and limitations stemming from national educational

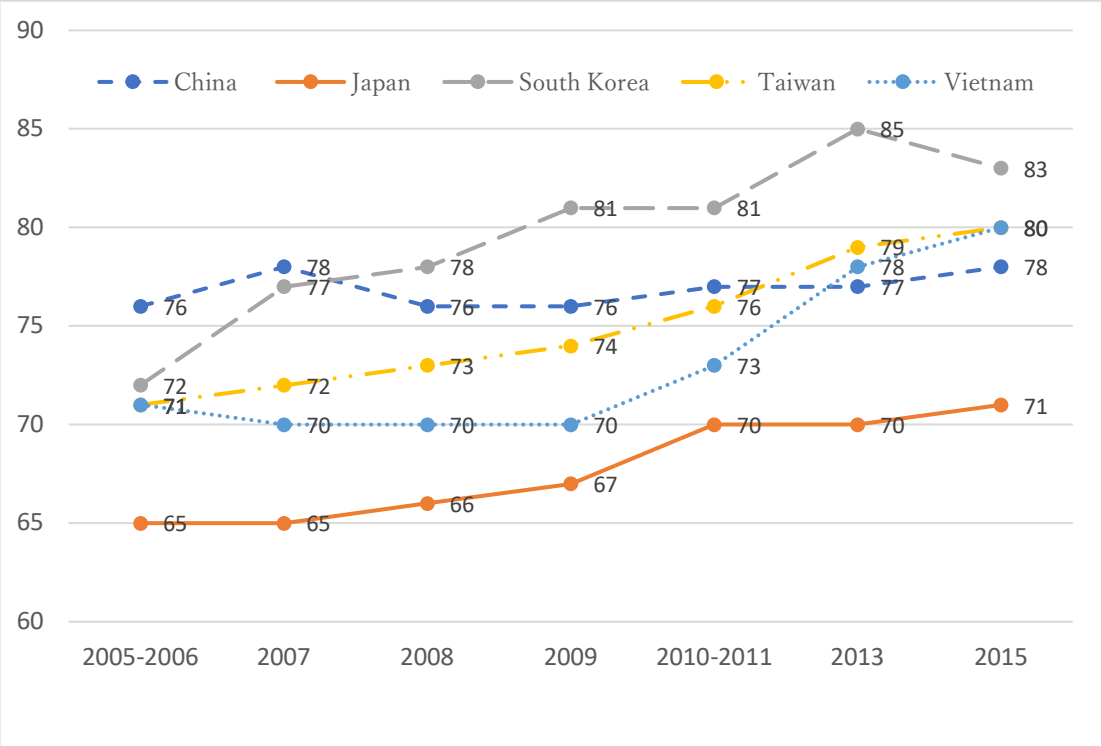

Figure 1. International comparison of TOEFL iBT scores

Source: Created by author based on Japan Business Foundation (2017)

guidelines and teaching strategy.

3. CURRENT STUDY

Japanese students' declining academic performance on global assessments and weak performance on internationally recognized English proficiency tests for nonnative speakers of English have consequences for student mobility and international competitiveness at an individual and national level. The current situation compounded with the internal challenge of a decreasing youth population is an urgent call to effectively educate global-minded students in Japan. This study was conducted in an attempt to understand factors that influence first-year students' attitudes toward learning English and their behavior to engage or not engage in English learning activities provided outside of classroom settings. The study also served as a preliminary exploration to gauge Japanese students' perceived benefits and learning outcomes facilitated through active learning strategies and autonomy-supportive interventions at a self-access learning center in higher education. The study holds practical implications that can be applied to improve the learning experiences for students provided by the facility at which the study was conducted. In a broader context, the author hopes that findings from the study spark interest towards the learning environments of self-access learning centers that serve to enhance English language education at

universities and their role in facilitating meaningful experiences and positive learning outcomes for students through engagement in active learning strategies and interventions.

The KONAN Language LOFT (an acronym for Language Opportunities For Today) is a self-access learning center that provides university-wide English language support and student-centered learning opportunities. LOFT adopts active learning strategies and interventions to promote students' English language proficiency and intercultural communication skills to foster a global mindset. LOFT is linked to a required freshmen English language speaking course and serves as an extension of English language instruction provided in traditional classroom settings. The learning environment promotes social interactions and appropriately fits Murray's (2018) description of a social learning space. Active learning strategies and interventions emphasize a communicative approach to language learning and incorporate interactive social elements with teachers, student staff, and peers to engage students in the learning process.

A core principle guiding the active learning strategies and interventions at LOFT is learner autonomy. Coined by Henri Holec, learner autonomy is defined as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p 3). Following this core principle, active learning strategies and autonomy-supportive interventions are designed and structured to encourage students who utilize the facility to take an active role in their individual learning process. When students utilize the facility, they begin by selecting a pathway from among three broad categories of interventions: *Visits*, *Tasks*, and *Events* (Yamamoto, 2017, 2020). The pathways that students select branch out to various resources that offer more choices to students. This effectively places students in control of what resources they use and how they engage in learning activities. Although students may be hesitant at first, repeating this simple process helps students become aware of their learning style and preferences, fosters self-confidence and a positive attitude towards learning English, and develops skills to achieve their learning objectives and goals. Autonomy-supportive interventions place students at the center of their learning to promote positive growth and development.

Participants. A combined total of 783 first-year students enrolled in the required freshmen English speaking course linked to LOFT participated in the survey. Sample 1 was comprised of 642 students who chose to utilize the self-access learning center at least once during the semester for class related purposes. Participants were enrolled in the following faculties: Letters (26%), Business Administration (23%), Law (19%), Economics (17%), and Science related faculties (15%). The sample group was consisted of 53% male and 47% female participants. Sample 2 was comprised of 141 students who chose not to utilize the self-access learning center despite knowing that the decision would have a negative effect on the grade they received for the course.

Participants belonged to the following faculties: Letters (16%), Business Administration (23%), Law (19%), Economics (23%), and Science related faculties (18%). Sample 2 was consisted of 69% male, 30% female, and 1% undisclosed participants.

Materials and measures. Sample 1 and Sample 2 were each administered separate questionnaires consisting of 30 item and 25 items, respectively. The first 19 items were identical in both questionnaires. Both questionnaires were comprised of a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Multiple-choice questions were constructed using a four-point scale that ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree or very satisfied to not satisfied at all. The higher the score the more strongly the student identified with the item. Surveys were created using Microsoft Forms to streamline the distribution of the surveys from language instructors to students. All surveys were administered within a two-week period at the end of the first semester of the academic year.

Survey items. A list of questions included in the surveys administered to Sample 1 and Sample 2 are provided below; all items listed are multiple-choice questions with single-response answers unless otherwise specified. This paper reports the initial results of a survey conducted as part of a multidimensional study. For clarity purposes, survey items not directly related to the current study have been extracted. Survey items and student responses to open-ended questions were translated from Japanese to English by the author.

Survey Items for Sample 1 and Sample 2

Item 1. Please indicate your faculty/department.
Item 2. Please indicate your gender.
Item 3. My university life is satisfying.
Item 4. Please indicate what you focus on in college life.
Item 17. I am not good at/do not like English.
Item 18. At what stage did you begin to dislike English?
Item 19. What made you think that you are not good at/do not like English? (open-ended)

Survey Items for Sample 1

Item 20. How many times did you utilize LOFT this semester?
Item 22. What is your overall satisfaction level of utilizing LOFT?
Item 23. If you answered not fully satisfied or not at all satisfied above, please explain why.
Item 24. Why did you utilize LOFT?
Item 25. What do you think of your experiences at LOFT?
Item 26. I can fully demonstrate my strength, ability, and experience at LOFT.
Item 27. Please explain why you think so.

Survey Items for Sample 2

Item 20. Please indicate why you chose not to utilize LOFT.

4. FINDINGS

The first section of the findings reported in this paper, details a comparison of students who chose to utilize and chose not to utilize the self-assess learning center. Participants in Sample 1 and Sample 2 were asked to select a single answer from the list of choices provided to indicate their primary focus in college life. Table 1 illustrates students' reported priorities during the first year of university life. Choices ranged from classes, friends, club and circle activities, future employment and career, off-campus experiences, overseas study abroad, and other items not listed.

Table 1. Students' reported priorities during the first year of university

Item	Sample 1		Sample 2	
	n	Percent	*n*	Percent
Classes	185	29%	34	24%
Friends	165	26%	38	27%
Club / circle activities	95	15%	31	22%
Future employment / career	124	19%	23	16%
Off-campus experiences (i.e. part-time jobs, community activities, etc)	38	6%	11	8%
Overseas study abroad	31	5%	1	1%
Other	4	1%	3	2%
Total	642	100%	141	100%

Findings suggest that a larger percentage of students who chose not to utilize the facility placed a higher priority on club and circle activities than their peers who utilized the facility. In contrast, a larger percentage of students who utilized the facility reportedly placed a higher emphasis on classes, future employment and career, and overseas study abroad. Students' reported focus on related academic items suggests stronger motivation to utilize the facility and fulfill their course requirements.

Students in both samples were asked to identify whether they dislike English, and two subgroups within each sample were subsequently created. Students who reported that they dislike English comprised 60% of students in Sample 1 and 66% of students in Sample 2 as illustrated in Table 2. Findings suggest that a large majority of students in both Samples 1 and Sample 2 were not intrinsically motivated to utilize the facility (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000).

Participants who answered that they dislike English were asked to indicate when they started to feel this way. Research indicates that experiences in junior high school and high school have a

Table 2. Proportion of students who dislike/like English

Students who dislike / like English	Sample 1		Sample 2	
	n	Percent	*n*	Percent
Students who dislike English	385	60%	93	66%
Students who like English	257	40%	48	34%
Total	642	100%	141	100%

significant impact on students' attitude toward learning English (Koizumi and Matsuo, 1993). Results show that 19% of students who did not utilize LOFT reported that they began to dislike English as a child or elementary school student compared to 9% of students who utilized LOFT. In contrast, 54% of students who utilized LOFT reported that they began to dislike English after entering junior high school compared to 47% of students who did not utilize LOFT. Thirty-three percent (33%) and 31% of students in Sample 1 and Sample 2, respectively, reported they began to dislike English when they were high school students. Interesting, the percentage of students who reported that they began to dislike English as a child or elementary school student is noticeably higher for students who did not utilize the facility. Students' responses are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Students' perception of when they began to dislike English

Time Period	Sample 1		Sample 2	
	n	Percent	*n*	Percent
Child - Elementary School Student	33	9%	17	19%
Junior High School Student	208	54%	44	47%
High School Student	128	33%	29	31%
University Student & Other	16	4%	3	3%
Total	385	100%	93	100%

An open-ended question was included in the survey to understand why students dislike English. Student responses were grouped into five categories, as shown in Table 4. Findings show a larger percentage of students in Sample 1 reported that they dislike English because the language is difficult. Additional reasons stem from not being able to remember or understand specific language areas such as grammar and vocabulary. In contrast, a noticeably larger percentage of students in Sample 2 reported that it was their lack of ability to understand English as a subject rather than a specific language area. Additionally, students reported that their dislike towards English stemmed from the lack of effort to study English. It is noteworthy to point out that research indicates students who reportedly dislike English are more likely to feel anxious about learning English, keeping up with class lessons, and taking exams; implications which have

shown to impact the academic performance of students negatively (OECD, 2017b).

Table 4. Students' reasons for disliking English

Reasons for disliking English	Sample 1		Sample 2	
	n	Percent	*n*	Percent
English is difficult, I dislike/can't remember/understand grammer, vocabularly, reading, etc.	126	50%	20	37%
I didn't study enough, I don't understand English	49	19%	15	28%
I could not keep up with English class	36	14%	8	15%
I could not earn high test scores/grades, I didn't like entrance exams	35	14%	6	11%
I didn't like my English teacher	7	3%	5	9%
Total	253	100%	54	100%

Students in Sample 2 were asked to select a single response that indicated their reason for choosing not to utilize the facility. Students' reported reasons are listed in Table 5. Thirty-four percent (34%) of students reported that they did not utilize the center because they were busy every day and did not have time to go to the facility. An additional 17% of students indicated that they did not like English. Another 25% of students indicated that they did not have a friend to go with to LOFT or did not feel comfortable going to LOFT. Findings of students' reported priorities introduced earlier indicate a large percentage of students who place importance on friends and

Table 5. Students' reasons for not utilizing LOFT

Response	Sample 2	
	n	Percent
I didn't have time to go to the center because I was busy everyday	48	34%
I dislike English	24	17%
I didn't have a friend(s) to go with to LOFT	20	14%
I didn't feel comfortable to go into LOFT	15	11%
I dislike socializing with people	9	6%
I didn't feel it was beneficial to utilize the center	9	6%
Other	8	6%
I didnt know how to utilize the center	5	4%
The environment was not conducive to independent study	2	1%
I'm not interested in foreigners or other countries	1	1%
Total	141	100%

value close social connections with their peers. Providing incentives and creative opportunities for students to visit with friends and classmates in addition to creating a friendlier atmosphere at LOFT may be key to reaching these students and improving accessibility.

The second section of the findings reported in this paper focus on participants who chose to utilize LOFT for class related purposes. Participants were asked to indicate how many times they utilized LOFT for class purposes. Students who visited LOFT 10 times during the semester-long English course received the maximum number of points applicable to their course grade. Results show that participants utilized LOFT as follows: 168 students (26%) visited 1-3 times, 117 students (18%) visited 4-6 times, 133 students (21%) visited 7-9 times, and 224 students (25%) visited 10 or more times. Moreover, findings reveal surprising gender differences among participants. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of male students and female students who utilized LOFT by the number of times they frequented LOFT for class purposes. The results show a significantly higher number of male students initially utilized LOFT in comparison to female students. In contrast, a substantially higher number of female students continued to utilize LOFT 10 or more times than male students.

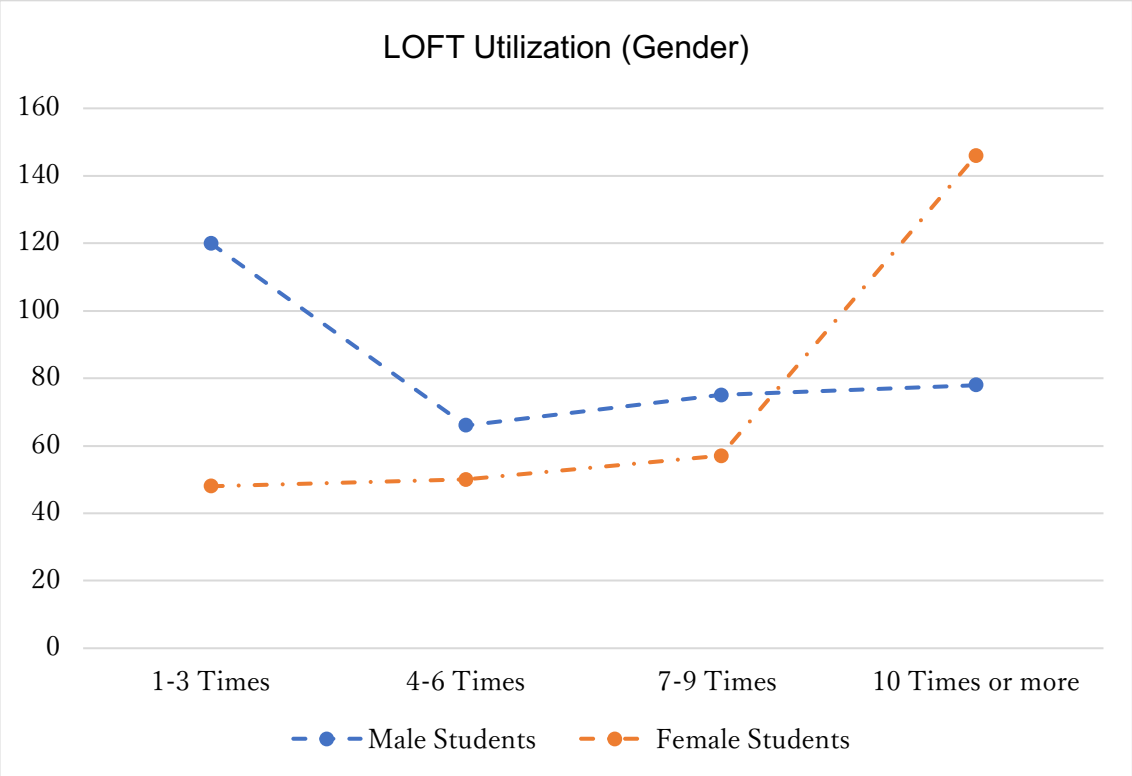

Figure 2. Frequency distribution of LOFT utilization by gender

Participants were also asked to indicate why they chose to utilize the self-access learning center. The large majority of students (76%) reported that they chose to utilize the self-access learning center because it affected their English course grade. Eighteen percent (18%) of students reported that they utilized the facility because they felt their English skills would improve. The remaining 6% of students indicated other reasons: they wanted to make friends with exchange students, broaden their global perspectives, and develop cross-cultural awareness. Survey results indicate that most students chose to utilize LOFT because it was a class requirement.

In an attempt to gauge students' perceived benefits and learning outcomes, participants were asked to indicate what they gained through their experiences of engaging in active learning strategies and interventions provided at LOFT. Less than a quarter of participants (21%) reportedly felt that they developed communication skills, followed by 17% of participants who felt the benefit of utilizing LOFT was meeting peers from other departments and international exchange students. Another 15% of participants reported that their English ability improved while 13% felt they gained the confidence to speak with people. Also, benefits directly related to learner autonomy were reported; namely, 12 % of participants felt they were able to choose interventions that fit their objectives, and 8% of participants reported that their ability to act autonomously was strengthened. Smaller numbers of participants also reported they could learn new ways of thinking by communicating in English, became more interested in the world, and could apply what they learned in class. A complete list of students' perceived learning outcomes is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Students' perceived benefits of utilizing LOFT

Response	*n*	Percent
I developed communication skills	133	21%
I had chances to meet peers from other departments & exchange students	106	17%
I improved my English ability	94	15%
I gained confidence to speak with people	85	13%
I was able to choose interventions that fit my objectives	75	12%
I strengthened my ability to act autonomously	53	8%
I could learn about new ways of thinking by communicating in English	31	5%
I became more interested in the world	26	4%
I could challenge myself to apply what I learned in class	27	4%
Other	12	2%
Total	642	100%

Although students' responses were the result of fixed choices, it does to some degree serve as an indicator of students' perceived benefits and learning outcomes. The results introduced here suggest that learning outcomes for students who engage in LOFT's active learning strategies and

interventions extend well beyond the benefits expected from purely English language education.

Participants were also asked to select a single answer to indicate the overall satisfaction of their experiences at LOFT. Findings show an overwhelming 90% of students were very satisfied or satisfied with their experience of utilizing LOFT compared to 10% of students who were not fully satisfied or not at all satisfied with their experiences at LOFT. Similarly, 87% of students who dislike English and 92% of students who like English reported that they were very satisfied or satisfied with their experiences at LOFT compared to 13% of students who were not fully and 7% of students who were not at all satisfied with their experiences. Students' perceived satisfaction levels of their experiences at LOFT are shown in Table 7. These are encouraging results considering that 60% of students in Sample 1 reportedly dislike English.

Table 7. Students' perceived satisfaction of LOFT

Group	Satisfaction of LOFT	*n*	Percent
Sample 1 *n*=642	Very Satisfied	94	15%
	Satisfied	478	75%
	Not fully Satisfied	54	8%
	Not at all Satisfied	16	3%
	Total	642	100%
Students who dislike English *n*=385	Very Satisfied	39	10%
	Satisfied	296	77%
	Not fully Satisfied	40	10%
	Not at all Satisfied	10	3%
	Total	385	100%
Students who like English *n*=257	Very Satisfied	55	21%
	Satisfied	182	71%
	Not fully Satisfied	14	5%
	Not at all Satisfied	6	2%
	Total	257	100%

Finally, participants were asked whether they felt able to demonstrate their individual strengths, abilities, and experiences at LOFT. Fifteen percent (15%) of participants reported that they strongly agreed, 61% of participants reported that they agreed, 22% of participants reported that they disagreed, and 3% of students reported that they strongly disagreed with this statement. Students were asked to explain their answers. The following responses were selected from among the 76% of participants who reported that they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that they could demonstrate their strengths, abilities, and experiences. Student entries highlight the

impacts of active learning strategies and interventions as well as students' engagement in the learning process.

Self-awareness & Growth

"I had many opportunities to talk about things relating to myself"

"I am able to look inside myself when I talk about my experiences in English"

"I can measure my abilities and further develop my skills"

"I can see my weak points and what I lack"

Experiences & Perspectives

"I can experience things that I would not normally be able to in daily life."

"I never had experiences like this throughout high school"

"I can experience English outside of class"

"I broadened my perspectives because I could have conversations with people that I wouldn't normally meet"

Confidence & Initiative

"I needed to make efforts to think and express my thoughts"

"I became proactive and took the initiative to talk"

"I tried my best to talk in English even if I am not good at English"

"I can now convey what I want to communicate"

Enjoyment & Curiosity

"I enjoyed talking and learning English"

"I had many opportunities to interact with various people"

"I can talk with the native speakers of English"

"I can learn about different values"

5. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Findings of this study suggest that the active learning strategies and interventions at LOFT have positive impacts on students' perceived benefits and learning outcomes and may likely contribute to enhancing students' positive attitudes and behaviors towards learning English. The study offers preliminary evidence that engagement in active learning strategies and interventions supported in a social learning space has the potential to produce high levels of satisfaction regardless of students' perceived attitudes toward English. Student entries show further evidence of their engagement in the learning process, namely, self-awareness and thoughtful reflection on their

growth as they actively experience and engage in learning opportunities facilitated through social interactions at LOFT.

It may be reasonable to suggest that the active learning strategies may be applied to a broader context. Findings offer hope that the skills students might potentially develop include necessary lifelong learning skills such as reflection, adaptability, interpersonal communication skills, social skills, and the ability to take action (initiative), to name a few. Student-centered interventions that incorporate elements of social interaction provide much-needed opportunities and options for students with diverse learning styles, objectives, and backgrounds to freely and autonomously engage in interactions and conversations in English with a wide network of peers. Such opportunities to engage in active learning activities allow individuals to test their current abilities in a safe learning environment, identify areas they feel lacking, and make sustainable efforts towards personal growth and development. Actively engaging in the learning process help students to develop self-awareness and self-confidence as they make efforts and take the initiative to use English to communicate their thoughts and ideas with teachers, student staff, and peers.

The study offers additional insights into factors that may influence the choices that students make to balance academic requirements and personal priorities. These findings have practical applications and will help to guide future modifications of interventions and learning environment to better meet the needs of students. The study also brings attention to gender differences. As briefly detailed earlier in this paper, more male students are initially motivated to utilize LOFT than their female counterparts. However, many of these students are quick to decide whether they will continue or not continue to utilize LOFT. More specifically, the decline in the number of male students who utilized LOFT without completing the full requirement for their English course suggest that the needs of male students are not sufficiently fulfilled by the experiences currently offered at the facility. Compared to male students, more female students continued to utilize LOFT and subsequently completed the requirement for their English course. The findings indicate that further research is necessary to understand gender differences and how it impacts student motivation and behavior to effectively promote a learning environment that enhances optimal growth and learning outcomes for all students.

Based on the author's observations and interaction with students who utilize LOFT, learning is a process that ideally occurs through strategic planning and preparation on the part of teachers. Often, however, it occurs spontaneously through unexpected learning opportunities generated by social interactions when students are actively engaged in sharing and connecting with other individuals about topics that capture their curiosity and interest. These observations stress the

importance of providing students with ample pathways to learning opportunities that give students the space and freedom to practically apply, measure, and develop their abilities and skills to reach their potential. Learning environments that can generate and support such active learning opportunities may hold significant implications for educational outcomes with likely impacts on the quality of higher education in Japan.

Finally, to optimize the learning opportunities that promote student growth and development, it is necessary to foster a sense of community in the learning environment. In short, it is essential to recognize and openly accept diversity in order for students to feel secure in voicing their thoughts without fear of judgment, venture beyond what is familiar, build confidence and capacity, and develop a robust sense of self and autonomy. Although there remains ample room for improvement and development at LOFT, it is safe to suggest that autonomy-supportive learning environments that incorporate active learning strategies and interventions provide students with a much-needed platform to apply knowledge gained in the classroom and develop essential lifelong learning skills. Considering the current trends of Japanese higher education and the challenges that face the nation, perhaps it is an opportune time to contemplate the role of self-access learning centers in higher education and their position to educate global-minded students who possess the motivation and capacity to take charge of their learning.

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